CULTURE AND IDOLATRY IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION: CONCEPTIONS AND MISCONCEPTIONS

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Abstract
This paper examines Culture and Idolatry in African Traditional Religion with particular interests in their conceptions and misconceptions. Igo ma (igo mmuo) / ife alusi (arusi) as a concept and in practice is understood as idolatry. On the other hand, omenani (culture) is a concept waiting to be prejudiced. In as much as it is people’s way of life, it takes on multi-variant referent values elastically. The findings of this paper reveal, inter alia, that a great number of people use omenala and igo ma interchangeably as synonyms with equiparate, same meanings. This paper strives, therefore, to conceptualize both words with the view to understanding the convergence and divergence in their referent values. Omenani is not an exclusivity of African Traditional Religion nor of Igbo Society, Southeast of Nigeria. We also have omenani Uka (the culture of the Holy Mother Church) for example. One of the recommendations of this work is that everyone should understand the broad and restricted meanings of culture and idolatry respectively. The methodology employed in this work is Culture Area Approach which means that this study focused on Igbo religion as practiced in Nsukka Area with a keen attention too on the pastoral issues generated by the problem of its two misconstrued basic ideas.

Keywords: Culture, Idolatry, Religion, Conceptions, Misconceptions.

Introduction
Man (Anthropos) is ens socialis, a social being as elaborated by August Comte. He expresses this characteristic by living in the society. In the society, there are interactions and relationship patterns which are functioned by communication. Human beings communicate, verbally or non-verbally and uniquely speak, a differentiating anthropological property. As described by Ludwig Wittgenstein, man is a lingual animal. In his naturalness, there are impediments to civilization and man’s self-actualization since at this status and stage, nature is undetermined and potentialities are yet to be activated, tapped into and harnessed in an unfolding process. However, in his artificiality, there are prospects of civilization because as homo rationalis, he manufactures tools (homo faber) with which he acts on nature and de-envelopes, that is unfolds the natural-given to better his conditions towards civilization and self-actualization.

With his intelligence (ratio), man produces intelligible sound and other forms of signs that can be represented in intelligible symbols. Man’s dynamism influences the dynamics of his work (opus) and word (verbum). The works of man can become obsolete or could give rise to better works as improved or refined by subsequent minds and epochs. In like manner, words can acquire new meanings with time and in varying contexts. Some words have the beauty or yet others have, the burden of multi-dimensional nuances.

As earlier mentioned, man is a being for the society; a social animal. In the expression of his social nature, there are consistencies that arise from his interactions with his fellow human beings. These consistencies constitute a way of life or aptly put: man’s culture. Culture can be defined as “the complex collection of knowledge, folklore, language, rules, rituals, habits, lifestyles, attitudes, beliefs, and customs that link and give a common identity to a particular group of people at a specific point in time”(encyclopediajrank.org, P.1). We have material and non-material culture. The former is seen in tangible, physical objects and the latter is found essentially in symbols, language, values and norms.
According to Okere (2005:31), “Culture is an artificial extension of biology, culture is the totality of our self-expression …It is the stamp of humanity on nature as created by God. God created nature; man has made culture”. Communication is fundamental to the weaving and unveiling of culture. Culture is characterized by dynamism as it changes over time, invisibility as some of the underpinnings are not tangible, complexities and multi-faceted as its structures are varied and variegated from group to group or within a group and subjectivity as it is particular to societies and groups. Based on the subjective nature of culture, it is factual that without open-mindedness there is a tendency to see other people’s culture as wrong. However, objectively speaking, some cultures do not satisfy the acceptable universal and local criteria for the essentials of human values (Ele, 2014: 1-5).

Human progress is not all about forward movement and neither is every reverse to be termed retrogression. The progress of peoples is not measured only by material quantities but also by the quality indices that make man truly man in his integral ontological dimensions such as rational, social, moral, religious, political, spiritual, economic, and cultural and so on. As communication contributes to nurture and the unfolding of the human person and societies, it is necessary to note that communication process completes only meaningfully when the receiver understands the meaning. In our socio-cultural environment, we mention omenala and igo ma on daily basis and use same concepts to invoke ideas and communicate same as statements of facts and of logic. Omenala anyi (our culture) should bow to Christ and communicate his gospel values. On the need for the culture to be a credible vehicle of Christian message, Bishop Onah (2014:34-35) taught that, “If creation, which is God’s handiwork is disfigured by man’s sins, how much more will culture, which is man’s creation, bear the negative signs of human sinfulness. As proud as we may be of our culture, and rightly so, let it always be borne in mind that culture is a cumulative product of human activity. A culture cannot be more perfect than the human beings who produced it. An encounter with Christ will bring forth the best in our culture, making it blossom from within and rendering some of its values universal values. In this way, our culture will itself become an instrument of the Christian message”.

The findings of this paper reveal, inter alia, that a great number of people use omenala and igo ma interchangeably as synonyms with equiparate, same meanings. This paper strives, therefore, to conceptualize both concepts with the view to understanding the convergence and divergence in their referent values. The methodology employed in this work is Culture Area Approach which means that this study focused on Igbo Religion as practiced in Nsukka Area with a keen interest too on the pastoral issues generated by the problem of its two misconstrued basic ideas. Nsukka, a zone taken to be a homogenous cultural fact by the many affinities of its constituent communities, a Catholic Diocese under the episcopal ministry of Most Rev Prof. Godfrey Igwebuike Onah, a people of Northern Igbo land of Enugu State, Southeastern Nigeria is the local context of our study.

Conceptual Framework: Omenala and Igo ma/Ife Arusi.

Omenala expresses the doing-formulae or behavioral patterns of a people. Omenala which has other dialect forms like omenani and omenal captures the tripartite ideas about what people do, how it is done and where it is done. Omenani showcases the constant actions or behaviors of a people. It is the people’s way of life –their culture. Ihe ndi abuna ndi na-eme n’ala ha bu omenala ha. One can say that omenala is a verb, a doing word – ihe obodo na otu di iche iche na-eme n’onwe ha m’obu n’etiti ha bu omenala ha.

Very close to Omenala is odinala. Odinala has Odinani or oddnal’ as its dialect plurality. Ihe di n’ala ndi n’emume na omume ha bu odinala ha. Onwere nku di na mba, nku dina mba na-ebere mba nri; m’obu o bu o ihe kuma o bu o di be ndi; that is people’s tradition. Unfortunately, many people associate omenala and odinala to some or all critical aspects of African Traditional Religion. But the fact is that these concepts and their meanings are not exclusive reserves of folk religion. Christian Religion, Roman Catholicism for one, has both omenala and odinala. The Holy Mother Church has culture and it is called omenani Uka. Her traditions are called odinala Uka m’obu odibendi nke nzuko; its transmission through proper catechesis is called nkuzi oibendi nke nzuko. To buttress these points, we appeal to Rev Fr Dr Uchenna Anthony Eze’s announcement during his ministry as the Principal Diocesan Secretary of Nsukka Diocese. Before Holy Communion, he always said:
The above announcement reveals some parts of our omenani Eucharistic aspects and on Ecumenism. In it too, the catholic odinala is linked with the usoro - the tradition which shows that catholic religious metaphysics is traceable to the scriptures and its mark of apostolicity (2 Thess 2:15-17).

We have obbnal’/obbnal’ which refers to the people especially the indigenes or the migrants who are well-informed about the culture of a people or the tradition of the place of their domicile. Hence, the proverb says obbnal’ ‘marr ekwu osukwu’. Another consideration here is to associate obbnal’ with an idea, say of followership severed from the immediate space. Hence, Christians live in the world but are not of the world (John 17:14-19). Ezigbo Onye otu kristi bi n’etiti ndi ome ndi uwa a ma na o mara n’uzo nke Kristi bu ekwu osukwu.

Nso ani: this refers to the African Traditional Moral Awareness. It is the sense of morality and sacredness in African Traditional Religion. It is the mores of the people according to or in honour of Ani, the earth goddess. Ani in Igbo Theosophy is not just the visible terra but an invisible being, a deity, a goddess. Ani bu Arusi, Al bu ma. Ani is the wife of the sky (igwe), a male god. In Igbo cosmology of duality and complementarity, oke na nwunye, the sky is the male while the earth is the female. This cosmology explains in part the abhorrence of gay/same sex marriage in Igbo culture. The marriage between human beings like that of igwe na ala must enjoy the nuptials of male and female, di na nwunye (Ele, 2016:238-247). It is the mother earth, the nurturer of fertility and the enforcer of morality and the abode of the dead. It is the sky, the male to whom the entire native territory belongs, hence fatherland. Ani occupies a central force in Igbo Cosmology. It is neither omen ’ikuku (in the air) nor omenannmiri (in the water) but omenani (on land). The centrality of Ani as a force in Igbo worldview is vivid in the following thought-patterns:

Advice – Anya ruo gi ani
Nti ruo gi ani
(To the dancer) Ukwu (waist) ruo gi ani
Satisfaction – Obi e ruo m ani
Virtue/humility – Umeani
Male youths – eg’ al’
Wives – Ndiom al’
Indigene/son of the soil – nwala/nwadiala/diala
Native place – Ani anyi/ani be anyi/al’ be anyi

In line with this evidence of Ani as a force in Igbo world view, we have Aniphoros names in Igbo society. Aniphoros names are Ani-bearing names such as:


“Aniphoros” is a concept I coined from a combination of two words, namely: Ani (Igbo) meaning “land” and phoros (Greek) which means “bearer”. Aniphoros names therefore are names of persons, places, ideas or things that bear Ani.

The obbnal’ perception talks of ebe onye bi k’o na-awachi and Very Rev. Monsignor. Sylvester Ugwu(Kobina) added ebe onye shi k’o na-ejido. Ebe k’ibi? Ibi n’uka ka I bi n’obodo? Here, it is essential to address the concept of obodo in the light of omenani in our hitherto frame of reference. We shall appeal to the authority of Johannine Christology at the instance of this conceptualization. Jesus Christ in the flesh, Jesus in his kenosis, Christ as Emmanuel, the Eternal Son of the Father, The Word Incarnate was a Jew. However, John the Apostle, the author of the Fourth Gospel that bears his name calls those Jews who stood in the opposition against Jesus, the Jews. In the same way and very often in our perceptions of demarcations, especially of membership and belongingness to the Church, we call the practitioners of Indigenous Religion...
ndi obodo, ndi ime obodo, ndi omenani. But all of us, Christians and they, are ndi obodo (nation of place) ndi ime obodo (rural dwellers). As for ndi omenani, we too have omenani Uka. You see this conceptualization in our Catechism. In our recitation of Ndi a buga nnukwu njo, we say: “ihe ndi obodo na-em…. ” (Dine et al, 2006:39).

Omenenu depicts aberration in some sense. In another sense, it is a misconception. When one displays a strange behavior, an action unfamiliar and a type which is at a distance with “how it is done”, it becomes omenenu. It is good to say that omenenu is not synonymous with evil when it is judged with other parameters. In some male circles, like in Nsukka cosmology, a woman is not allowed by culture of absolute patriarchy to pick kola nut from the tray or dish or pray over kola nut in the presence of a male including her young son. But it is not intrinsically evil if a woman does so. If the Holy Mother advances the freedom of women in this direction and in many other ways, then she is supporting omenenu. Onye uka rapu omenani Uka mebe ihe ndi ogo ma/muo, o buru omenenu. Mana onye ogo ma rapu omenani ndi njo/owa bu ife alusi mebe usoro na omenani Uka, o burunu ezi onume nke ncheghari. Conversion from any religion under heaven to Christianity is for the convert to have discovered The New Way.

Igo Ma, Muo/ Ife Alusi, Arusi

We begin with the question: Chukwu O bu ma/muo? We answer: E ye. The answer is in the affirmative because muo na ma are the same but are implicated in the many dialects of Igbo people. In Obukpa Religion, there is Egba Chukwu, feast in honour and worship of Chukwu Abiamu. In onu Chukwu (shrine), normally in otobo (village square), there is an altar and the onyishi is the priest. Egba Chukwu in Obukpa and across Igbo land is imperfect and could be understood as praeparatio evangelica. (Ele, 2017:112-114). There is another issue of conceptualization in what we do as omenani Missa di aso. Anyi a na-ago Chukwu n’aja Mass? Anyi na-efe Chukwu n’uno Uka, ebe nile na ekpom’ekpo ma ndi ogo muo na-efe alusi n’ulo ma. It is good to note that igo ma/muo is synonymous with ife Alusi/Arusi. Ojefua (1979:25) traces the origin of idols to the devil through the fall of man. In his words:

“But as men grew numerous, they forgot God, followed the devil and worshipped idols. Then, the whole world became pagan. You can see, then that paganism is not an African religion as such. It was the religion of the whole world led astray by the devil. Paganism in Africa today is what remains of the universal old paganism in the whole world – that is, in those countries now known as Europe, Asia, America and so on. But as other nations abandoned paganism because they saw it was wrong and was the devil’s work, so you are expected to turn away from idol worship and from the devil, enemy of God and man. You are to worship the true God”.

The worship of false gods or the worship of creatures violates the first commandment of God and offends God, the Creator (Exodus 20:1-6; Deut 5:7-10). O bu isekpulu chukwu asi m’obu alusi ya na 1 were nsopulu dili sosu chukwu wenye ihe obuna ekelu eke (Bishop Nwedo: 1959:52). O bu nkafe bu isekpulu alusi (Psalm115/113B:1-8). O bu nkafe bu isekpulu alusi ka? E ye, O bu nkafe bu isekpulu arusi maka na mmadu mebelu fa, ndu fa enwe, ike ikwu okwu ma a enwe, nke fa na-afu uzo, nke fa na-anu ife, ide fa eje, mmerube fa emerube, ife ma fa eli, wee gabazia(Bishop Nwedo, 1959:53). Let us at this juncture agitate our minds based on the theology of this catechism of nkafe bu isekpulu alusi; namely: Ebe obu nkafe bu isekpulu alusi makana mmadu mebelu fa, O bu nkafe bu ije uka ozo na aburo Uka Katolik makana mmadu mebelu fa?

Igo muo/ma includes ife alusi, ikpoku ndi muo, igba afa na ichu ajah, ime m’obu idebe ogwu chekwube ya ka chukwu, igwo ajo ogwu dika ogwu ego m’obu ogwu igbu mmadu, ikwa ozo n’usoro ndi na-efe alusi, m’obu isonyere ndi na-em otu ahu (Dine et al, 2006:39). O gunyekwere iti akatakpa, odo, omabe, ma abble ma eji eri oriri alusi, m’obu nke etiri n’ikpa ochi na egwumegwu etinyere ogwu n’ime ya, isonye n’otu nzuzu na-ejere ekwensu ozi ma na-efe ya, ime inyama na igba afa n’uzo agbara ohuru n’aka uka na ekpere asi broda na sisita, wee gabazia.

Uka/ Ndi Uka: This is another concept with multiple nuances. We give examples below:

Uka – ibo uka, ikpa nkata. Ndi uka na Chukwu na-abo uka (liturgy and prayer). The distraction to this communication and conversation is sinful. Hence, in Catholic Peccatology, we read: ikpa nkata n’ebi a na-aka uka m’obu n’iuru Eukaristia di aso.

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Okwu na uka – At the moment of baptism, Christians reject Satan, his works and empty promises. They equally say no to the religious practices of their fathers that contradict the Christian faith. At the wake of this new creation, as they are clothed in Christ, nsogbu ebido, okwu na uka amalite, ostracism, denial of rights, conflicts as faith meets faith and other forms of pressures from the non-christians.

Uka/Nzuko – The Church is the Assembly of God. Qahal Yahweh in Hebrew and Ekklesia Tou Theou in Greek. Hence, Nzuko Nso Katoli.

Uka bu Umanna/Umunne Kristi, Ezi na Ulo Chukwu – Christ who inaugurated a new family said, These are my mother and my brothers and sisters. (Matthew 12:46-50). So, we are brothers and sisters, members of one family where Christ is the first born Son. The ministerial priests are Fathers in the deepest spiritual union with those they have become their fathers in Christ (1 Cor 4:15). In our popular hymns and choruses we celebrate this fact thus:

Anyi bu ezi na ulo Chukwu, Aa Ee , anyi bu ezi na ulo Chukwu, Chukwu huru anyi na-anya.

And in another song:
We are heirs of the Father,
We are joint heirs with the son,
We are children of the kingdom, we are family,
We are one.

Apart from the song above, in Regina Caeli Chaplaincy, Nsukka, another slogan of unity and family solidarity could be:
Regina Caelites – one family
Regina Caelites – one family
One family of God – Regina Caelites.

This does not replace the odihendi anyi bu otito dili Jesu m’obu Ave!

The Holy Mother Church’s understanding of her truest nature and deepest identity are found in the Holy Bible (Matthew 28:19-20; Mark 16:15; Acts 1:8) and in the Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents such as Lumen Gentium 1,48, Ad Gentes Divinitus 2, Evangelii Nuntiandi, 15,75, Redemptoris Missio,2, Ecclesia in Africa,63, among others.

Pastoral Considerations

The above discourse has shown that Omenani is larger than Igo ma/ Ife Alusi. Igo ma n’uzo abuna uzo, mana nzuoz ma aburu omenani Uka. Bishop Michael U. Eneja of Enugu Diocese, Servant of God, explains the taxonomy of Omenani thus:

2. Omenani di njo n’ime di mma n’iro - A ga-ebepu njo ya
3. Omenani di mma n’ime di njo n’iro – A ga-asacha njo ya
4. Omenani di njo n’ime di njo n’iro – A ga-atufu ya, mmadu emekwana ya.

According to the Bible, the golden calf was an idol, a cult image made by Aaron for the Israelites during Moses’ absence, when he went up to Mount Sinai. This event of idolatry is called sin of the calf (Exodus 32:1-6). In the palace of Ahab, false prophets of Baal were found in large numbers. Their origins could be traced to the non-Jewish queen Jezebel, the king’s wife. In Nsukka Culture, what are the origins of these idols that hold people captive? They include Adoro Ero, Ube Uhun’owerre, Api Opi, Lolo Uhare Iheaka, Enwe Enugu Ezike, Ezugwu Amalla, Ocherr’ Orba, Nneumu Kwome Obukpa, Nkpume Itchi, Awulla Igaghwa-Ani, Mgboto Enugu Ezike, Ohe Nrobo, Ohe Nsukka and so on. All of them started at a point in history. Today, some promoters of neo-paganism revamp their shrines and encourage oath taking, convenant making and other values of religious tourism around them (Ele, 2017:35-42).

The issues of human rights’ violations at the grave instances of Omahe, Akatakpa, Odo and other masquerades are contemporary trends that must be curbed in Nsukka land and beyond. They fly on the wings of Omenani to perpetrate heinous crimes in the otherwise peaceful society of Igbo Nsukka. Unfortunately, the structures of the functioning of these masks have been violated variously. These Mmonwu ma and their violations came from within its institutions, for examples, its initiation process has been bastardized, its display/performances are eventful with criminalities of robbery, rape, torture, blocking of roads and...
extortions, and therefore its relevance is already overtaken in the society of properly constituted police, judiciary and many entertainment outfits (Ele, 2018, 86-91).

The youth apostolate already begun in the Diocese of Nsukka is a wonderful evangelization program. The good fruits are becoming vivid daily on the side of abundance. However, the competent authorities in charge of the youth, that is, the Chaplains at all levels should be alert to ensure that they do not usurp spaces and functions that are not designed for them. One of the problems in the masquerade institution in Nsukka is that the youth took over the religious practice without reference to the code of conduct, nor its structures and secrecy. In like manner the youth have started to integrate their customaries into the Lord Bishop are simply the processes, implementation and the fruits of inculturation. The necessary purifications referred to here by it is equally true that it is a symbol that has been immersed in pagan worship and cult, which cannot be commoditize womanhood are from the Igbo Traditional Religion. What it means is that these men are practitioners of folk religion and not Christians. Moral life is thrown to the winds by the menfolk because of the dignity of womanhood has been compromised in our Igbo society and beyond. On this, Obodoechina (2013:43) wrote: “As in many other cultures, the violation of the rights of women seems to belong to the order of events. The Nigerian society is not an exemption. Neither is the situation different in Nsukka. The incessant abuse and violation of fundamental rights of women in our midst naturally drew the attention of the diocese.” Some men deny them their rights in the name of Omenani. Oath taking (inu iyi) and covenant making (igba ndu) as a way of preventing or resolving conflicts in African Traditional Religion by Christians is embarrassing as inu iyi na-alusi m’obu inu iyi asi na Bible ka abukwa nnukwu njo. You ask question, you receive an answer na anyi jere n’omenani. O ka mma no onye a kwuru na anyi jere goo muol/ goma ma.

The dignity of womanhood has been compromised in our Igbo society and beyond. On this, Obodoechina (2013:43) wrote: “As in many other cultures, the violation of the rights of women seems to belong to the order of events. The Nigerian society is not an exemption. Neither is the situation different in Nsukka. The incessant abuse and violation of fundamental rights of women in our midst naturally drew the attention of the diocese.” Some men deny them their rights in the name of Omenani. Oath taking (inu iyi) and covenant making (igba ndu) as a way of preventing or resolving conflicts in African Traditional Religion by Christians is embarrassing as inu iyi na-alusi m’obu inu iyi asi na Bible ka abukwa nnukwu njo. You ask question, you receive an answer na anyi jere n’omenani. O ka mma no onye a kwuru na anyi jere goo muol/ goma ma.

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or ogede, oriokpa and odo are regarded as ma, namely, things that represent the spirits and, therefore, cannot be treated like any human being who masks himself for entertainment, deception, or crime, any Christian who gets involved in them is engaged in idol worship and sometimes in criminal activity. So long as they are considered religious symbols of the traditional religion, Christians should have nothing to do with them (Bishop G.I. Onah, 2018:1-2). With the magisterial catechesis of the incumbent Bishop G.I.Onah of Nsukka Diocese, we turn to the recommendations/concluding section.

Recommendations/Conclusion

Igo ma/ife Alusi as a concept and in practice is idolatry. It is a practice in the cultures, religions or cults that worship false gods or the devil. Omenani is a concept waiting to be prejudiced. To say that igomai/ife alusi has the exclusive referent value of omenani completely is totally wrong. Omenala has good aspects intrinsically and extrinsically and can go on without igomai/ife alusi. We have omenani Uka as a good example. This paper has tried to conceptualize omenala and igomai/ife alusi with the recommendations that everyone understands their broad and restricted meanings respectively. Again people should stop using omenani and igomai/ife alusi as synonyms and interchangeably.

Igo ma/ife Alusi has taken the communities that practice them many tens of years back from the comprehensive unfolding of their societies and the integral development of their members. Man as a social being needs peace and progress within him and around him. Nsukka has the religious dominance of Christianity and African Traditional Religion. Each religion in its distinctiveness has culture and tradition. Idolatry is a bad culture that denies God his due worship and distorts the integral progress of his children. The dynamism of culture implies that any culture that is retrogressive should be abolished. The shrines of idols, their grooves and their masquerades, their feasts and their emblems are human inventions and can as well be made to exist only in the dust bin of history. Let us remember that “give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belong to God” (Matthew 22:21) is to give both the money and the Caesar to God. Nsukka people and many other societies in the world have labored under negative influences of bad cultural forms over time. It is time to stamp them out because ahafu aru ke o gbarr ahua, o buru omenani. The futuristic dimension of development is sustainability. Igo ma/If Alusi are human constructs which in the face of new realities of Christianization, urbanization, westernization, technologization, without prejudice to its own modern false goods, and eternal salvation should face a deconstruction in order to activate and sustain its extinction; and thus give room for a reconstruction of new cultural forms in the light of Christ and his Christian civilization.
References